EK AADHAN EK SAMADHAN EK PRADHAN

Shri Amar Nath Vaishnavi

FATHER OF COMMUNITY

President

ALL STATE KASHMIRI PANDIT CONFERENCE

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AMAR NATH VAISHNAVI

THE PATRIARCH OF THE PANDITS OF KASHMIR

Pandit Amar Nath Vaishnavi, a noble Kashmiri Pandit, is one among the stalwarts who have inspired, guided and led the Pandit comminity, from time to time, through the ups and downs of it's history. **Shri Vaishnavi,** whose political career spans well over half a century, is an epotome of humility, selfless service and sacrifice, the qualities which have surfaced time and again during long years of his service to the community.

The events and developments concerning the Kashmiri Pandit community during the later half of the 20th century bear evidence to the fact that **Shri Vaishnavi** has always been in the front ranks for the cause of his community, striving for its rights, fighting against the injustices meted out to it, and steering it with honour and dignity through many difficult times. In this noble mission of his life, **Shri Vaishnavi** has gone through many a suffering, including jail terms, torture and wrath of the govenment. But he has always suffered with a smile on his lips and renewed determination after every ordeal.

The **first inspiration** that kindled the flame of patriotism in the heart **of Shri Vaishnavi** came to him when he was a small boy of six years age. The year was 1931, when one of his brothers was the member of a revolutionary group, formed by Pandits youths of Srinagar city. He would act as the errand boy of the group, carrying messages to its members. He would also sing patriotic songs at the functions of the revolutionary group. Shri Bal Ji Zuthshi, now residing in London, headed the small organisation. Its other members included Dinanath Kaul (Nadim), Ram Nath Vaishnavi, Jagan Nath Koul, K. N. Manoori, Prem Nath Dhar & N.N. Raina Mazari. In later years all of them achieved distinction in different walks of life. Not many years later, **Shri Vaishnavi,** then studying in seventh standard, had the first taste of a police lathi when he participated in **Durga Nag agitation** and got a police thrashing.

Like most of the educated youth of the pre-independence days **Shri Vaishnavi** longed and craved for Swaraj and was always enthusiastic about being a part of the freedom movement. He always prefrred the company of like-minded youths whose sole dream those days was the attainment of the country's independence.

However **it was in 1953** when **Shri Vaishnavi stepped into active political arrena.** He joined EK NISHAN EK VIDHAN EK PRADHAN movement, launched by **Praja Parishad. He was arrested in Pathankot and lodged in Gurdaspur Jail.** Later he was shifted to jails in Ambala and Delhi and then released after a few months of incarceration. In subsequent years **Shri Vaishnavi** was imprisoned several times. **In 1967**, during the agitation triggered by the abducton of a Pandit girl, Shri Vaishnavi was arrested in Delhi and lodged in Tihar Jail. In 1969, he was transfered to Ladakh because of

aweaking amoung Kashmiri Pandits about their political rights. While in Ladakh, Shri Vaishnavi came forward in support of the agitation launched by the local people there against discrimination by the state govenment. He was arrested and jailed for three months. In 1975, when Shri Vaishnavi was the RSS chief for Kashmir Division, he was put behind the bars for over five months.

There is hardly any movement, event or development, concerning the political, social, economic and religious affairs, issues and problems of Pandits, with which **Shri Vaishnavi** has not been/actively associated, often as the helmsman. To name only a few, he has headed or held key positions in **All State Kashmiri Pandit Conference,** Amar Balidan Trust, Bahuhatkeshawr Bhairav Trust, Kashmiri Pandit Political Steering Committee, BJP, Apex Committee (for displaced Pandits) of National Human Rights Commission, Durga Nag Trust, J&K Shayata Samiti, and many others.

Like all leaders of men, Shri Vaishnavi's has had his admirers as well as detractors, but **nobody ever has raised any doubts about his honesty of purpose, integrity and unflinching dedication to the cause,** and the rights and well-being of Pandits. He has never let down his people and, **unmindful of his own personal hardships, he has always come up to the expectations that the commuinity had from him.**

A man-made disaster struck Kashmir, especially the Pandits, in 1989-90, when a reign of terror and murder was unleashed by Islamic fundamentalists, sponsored and backed by Pakistan, with Pandits as the selective targets. The impact was so calamitous that in a matter of a few months the entire Pandit community, was made to flee its home and hearth, to live in the perennial wilderness of forced exile. The tragedy was preceded by some ominous warnings like the largescale communal violence against Pandits in scores of villages of Anantnag district during 1986. In 1987, the famous Somnath Mandir at HabbaKadal was set on fire. There were also incidents of killing like those of Ashok Ganjoo by a freshly trained militant, and of a Mahant at Vicharnag, by a policeman who was on duty to guard the temple.

The exodus was a trauma for every Pandit, but for Shri Vaishnavi and ASKPC, the organisation he headed, it was also a daunting challenge. But as soon as the terror-stricken, displaced Pandits started arriving in Jammu, Shri Vaishnavi and his team of dedicated colleagues immediately got down to the task of rendering all possible assistance to the victims of exodus, in colloboration with different govenment agencies. All matters like registration, free rations cash relief and acommodation werre dealt with on emergency basis to make sure that no displaced person suffered on account of these elementary needs. In a matter of days, improvised tented camps came up at a number of places to acommodate the homeless Pandits.

Shri Vaishnavi took pains to make sure that the education of boys and girls of the displaced population did not suffer. Accordingly schools and colleges, including those in camps, came up for the displaced people which continue to be functional.

It was under the leadership of **Shri Vaishnavi** that **ASKPC** launched many peaceful agitations to highlight the grievances and problems of the displaced community. During one such massive protest demonstration, against an unfair order of the govenment, General Secretary of ASKPC, Shri H. L. Chatta and many other workers were arrested. Delhi Chalo Andolan was organised in 1990 and a huge rally was held at boat club to highlight the demands of the displaced population in general, and those its youth in particular.

Whether it is the question of the employment of Pandit youths or their education in professional, technical and other institutes ouside the state, Shri Vaishnavi is always on the lookout for exploring new opportunities, so as to ensure a better, brighter, and economically stable future for the younger generation of the displaced community. It is due to the untiring efforts of Shri Vaishnavi and other prominent leaders of the commuinity that a whole new generation of Pandit boys and Girls equipped with proper education and training in different callings, is today confidently poised to build a glorious future for themselves and for their homeless community.

Shri Vaishnavi is determined to see that the state govenment enacts a law on the pattern of Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee Act, for the protection and maintenance of Hindu religious properties in Kashmir, most of which are now in a state of neglect or ruin or have been encroached upon. On the common man's front, the practice of mass Yogneopavit ceremony and weddings has been introduced which has brought tremendous relief to displaced people of limited means.

Shri Vaishnavi's life is an open book. It is a saga of the selfless service by a humble, gentle and noble son of Kashmir who has done whatever he could for the good of his people, but who has sought nothing in return for himself.

Pandit Amar Nath Vaishnavi has completed eighty eventful years of his life. Today, by virtue of his great service to his community, he stands tall among his people and rightfully deserves the honour of being called the patriarch of the Pandits of Kashmir.

Shri Vaishnavi is now looking with great hope at the younger generation of Pandit leadership. It is his deep desire, his craving, that the young Pandit leadership should rise above the trivialities of politics and politicking and join together to fulfil the community's longing to go back to Kashmir, to its homeland, in honour and dignity. It is for the young leadership to derive strength, true dedication and inspiration from the benign presence, guidance and patronage of Shri Vaishnavi and translate his dream into reality, which, in truth, is the dream of every single member of the displaced and dispossessed Pandit community.

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